2024/25

THE SU

Getting Started Survey

The Report

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The Getting Started Survey
Falmouth & Exeter Findings

79% of participants came to university to get a degree and support their future degree

Exeter students would most like to attend social events; Falmouth students would most like to attend creative events

Away from getting a degree, 75% of participants rank making new friends as most important to them

79% of participants are either a member of a student group or planning to join one

Community, Wellbeing and Employability are most important to students

98% of participants expressed interest in attending events at university

33% of participants joined their student group to make friends

42% of participants who weren't interested in joining a student group noted time constraints with a further 34% citing financial restrictions
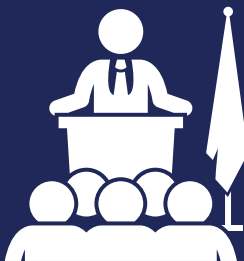
54% of participants were aware of our representation processes but did not know how they represented them

73% of participants either did not know any or only knew one or two of the officers

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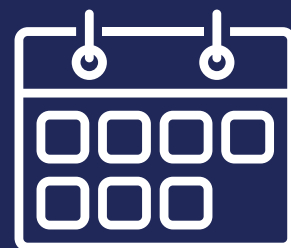
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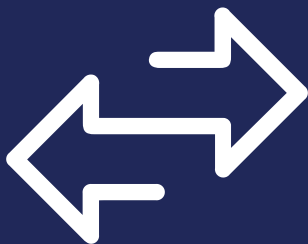
Summary (Tl ; Dr)

To gain better insight to our students, we launched The Getting Started Survey in September 2024 – a research project centred around getting to know who our students are, their motivations and what they would like to see from their university experience. We received a total of 345 responses (51% Exeter and 49% Falmouth), and it has highlighted the time poor nature of university and financial barriers that students are facing but also, that career & employability are high priorities paired with a desire for opportunities to meet new people and make friends.

Motivations and Priorities

What does the data tell us?
- 79% of participants came to university to get a degree and support their future careers;
- Away from getting a degree, 75% of participants rank making new friends as most important to them;
- When ranking our Officers' priorities, Community, Wellbeing and Employability are most important to students.

What are students saying?
"I was never the best student in my class during my school years. However, having the opportunity to choose a career I am passionate about and a university that provides me with everything I need to achieve the best results has motivated me to focus on goals that will help me grow personally and professionally. I also love being surrounded by people who share the same passion and enthusiasm for what they do as I do. We can help each other grow and bring out our best potential."

"... My late sister went to the same university so being here for myself means a lot."

What does this mean?

Career development is a high priority to students, and this goes beyond just obtaining a degree and encompasses networking opportunities, activities that enhance their employability and improves their self-confidence. We need to understand how we can create a balance between employability and social opportunities to meet all students' needs.

Events

What does the data tell us?
- 98% of participants expressed an interest in attending events at university;
- Exeter students would most like to attend social events whilst Falmouth students would prefer creative events.

What are students saying?
"I would attend as many as a budget would allow. Unfortunately, once again, as online students our resources are restricted.... But I would of course LOVE to attend events. I haven't yet managed to get down to campus yet and as a 3rd year student it breaks my heart."

"Lots of events happen on Penryn and getting the bus there to attend an event and nothing else can be a hassle. Bus prices have also risen."

"I do wish more social, less academic events were held outside of campus. I would definitely find a more social atmosphere separated from an academic environment would encourage me to participate more."

What does this mean?

Overall, there is a clear desire amongst students to attend events with it linking to the motivations & priorities identified in this research. - with clear opportunities to develop employability through our events programme but also providing a clear chance to meet new people and gain valuable friendships. However, there are significant external barriers being placed on students which restricts their ability to attend events – with time and financial constraints reoccurring throughout this research.

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Activities

What does the data tell us?
- 54% of participants are a member of at least one student group with a further 25% planning on joining one;
- 33% of participants joined their student group to make friends, whilst 28% wanted to stay active whilst at university;
- For those who have joined clubs or societies, 38% were attracted to the group as it was something they were already interested in, with 27% seeing the group on the website before moving to university and identifying they wanted to join in advance;
- For students who were not interested in joining, 42% noted time constraints as the reason with a further 34% citing financial restrictions.

What are students saying?
"I would've liked to join netball, but I simply cannot afford it"

"Intimidating …. people seem to know each other well already??" "Societies might be one of the most important things to me (aside from the degree) about university…"

"The societies and sports clubs I've joined have been a highlight of my university experience so far!!!"

"I just don't have the time and energy to do things outside of my course, which is a shame as there are multiple societies which are of interest to me."

What does this mean?
Whilst students recognise the value of joining a student group, there are clear barriers to them doing so with time & financial constraints limiting participation. There are already processes in place & in progress to assist students with participation but overall, we need to assess how we can reduce barriers for students to be able to engage more fully in student groups. This is an issue that is linked to the wider provision we (and the partnership as a whole) can provide to students – particularly related to the cost-of-living crisis.

Representation

What does the data tell us?
- 54% of participants were aware of the process but did not know how these represented them;
- 73% of participants either did not know any or only knew one or two of the Officers;
- 33% of participants feel represented when they can see visible improvements or changes to their university experience, with 29% valuing being well informed to the work that The SU is doing on their behalf.

What are students saying?
"...the SU here is incredibly strong and inspiring to me as I feel they include everyone and want to listen and encourage others to express themselves too"

"I know who the presidents are and what their goals are, but they all seem to be working at a wider university level, which is also good, but they don't seem to be representing"

"Representation means to feel seen, comfortable, and safe. To me, it means a support system for you as an individual – not just an academic. It should mean that are plans and thoughts are heard and implemented to make the overall university life a better place for individuals as students and individuals as people in general."

What does this mean?
When looking at representation, participants are aware of the processes in place at The SU but lacked the knowledge of how this represents them and in turn, the benefit to them related to this. Students value being seen and their voice being not only heard but visible action from their feedback when they provide it. We need to look at how we can increase the visibility and awareness of the Officers to benefit their work further, allowing students to access & understand the representation available to them.

Support

What does the data tell us?
- Access to academic support is most important to students;
- 64% of participants would be most comfortable seeking advice or support from friends and family;
- There are clear barriers to access support whilst at university.

What are students saying?
"There is support offered but it seems all over the place and you have to jump through hoops to get to them which is not very help to people who are in need of them..."

"I'm struggling with student finance and DSA and never really get the hand holding support I need; I only get signposting. Noone spends time with me walking through each step."

"The mental health support service needs more people and more funding; the support they provide is not helpful because they can't dedicate the time to each student."

What does this mean?
Students are facing challenges accessing their desired level of support whilst at university, some participants feel that there are barriers to access appointments and that the service provided is often more sign posting than dedicating time to individualised responses. However, participants are most comfortable seeking advice from friends and family so there is scope to explore peer to peer support as weel as increasing awareness of the support available to students – and importantly, how they can access this.

Communication

What does the data tell us?
- 41% of participants stay up to date with The SU via social media;
- 61% engage with the SU's content on a weekly basis;
- Students would most like to receive information on events (30%), the local community (21%) and updates from student meetings (20%) within the newsletters;
- Students would like to see information on events (26%), highlights from societies and student groups (22%) and information on the local community (17%) from our social media channels.

What are students saying?
"I like how in the emails, you make it easy to spend times on the things that are relevant for you, so it's not too much effort! Otherwise, I probably wouldn't read them but now I do"

"...Not just newsletters perhaps more events, stalls in exchange or just more personal, face-to-face exchanges."

"...interactive quizzes such as 'what society best fits you?' or 'what new sports should I try?' would be really beneficial as I want to advance outside of my comfort zone but a tailored response to interactive questionnaires would be beneficial in narrowing down this decision in a way that best suits the individual without becoming overwhelmed."

What does this mean?
Students want us to engage with them in new ways that centre around personalised experiences and physical interactions. As such we need to assess how we can adapt our communication offering to meet these needs. Largely, it is looking at elevating our content pillars and expanding engagement away from the digital space.

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Introduction

Each year, we receive a new cohort of students changing our membership. This means that every twelve months, we need to understand a new demographic of students and what they expect from us. Previous analysis of our research into areas such as belonging has identified that we have limited data to benchmark student satisfaction against. Therefore, resulting in us being unable to improve & develop our work to better meet the needs of our students.

At the beginning of Term One of the 2024/25 academic year, Falmouth & Exeter Students' Union (The SU) began research to gather information related to student expectations, priorities and experiences. The project aimed to engage all student demographics but with a launch targeted during the Welcome period, it was acknowledged that there would likely be a biased towards new students entering their first year of study in Cornwall.

Aims & Objectives

The overall aim of this research is to build an evidence base to help understand student expectations and priorities, to inform our future work.
This will be supported by the following objectives:
- **To understand what matters most to our current students during their time at university.**
- **To understand what frequency of communications & events is most appropriate for our students.**
- **To produce a set of recommendations, activities and best practice examples of how to engage students for our future work.**

The SU launched an online survey during Welcome week which remained open for a total of four weeks. This was promoted via newsletters, social media and face to face interaction with students. The results of the survey were then analysed using a range of methods including statistical & thematic analysis.
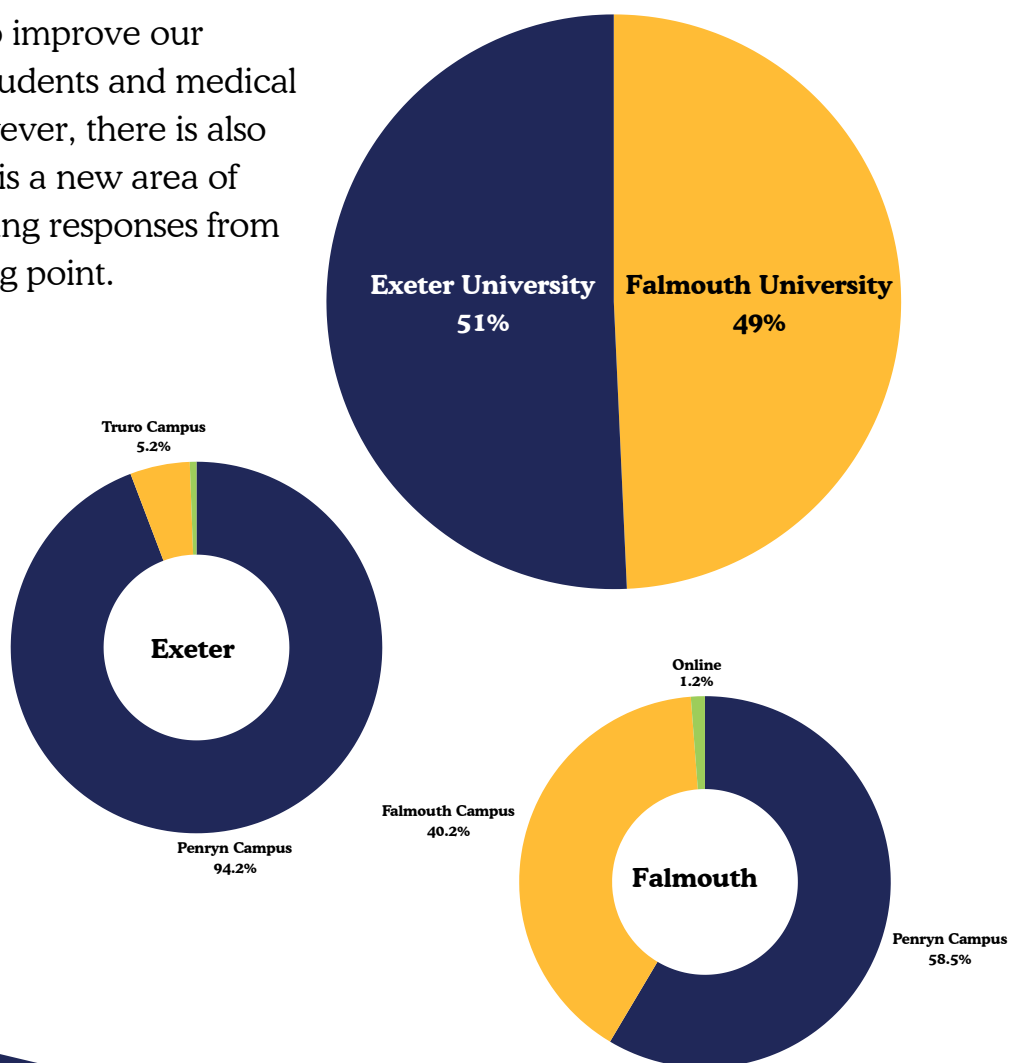
This report serves two main purposes. The first is to understand the key motivations behind students attending university and the aspects that matter most to their experience and secondly, to identify how we can adapt our offering to meet these needs and contribute to the improvement of the student experience.
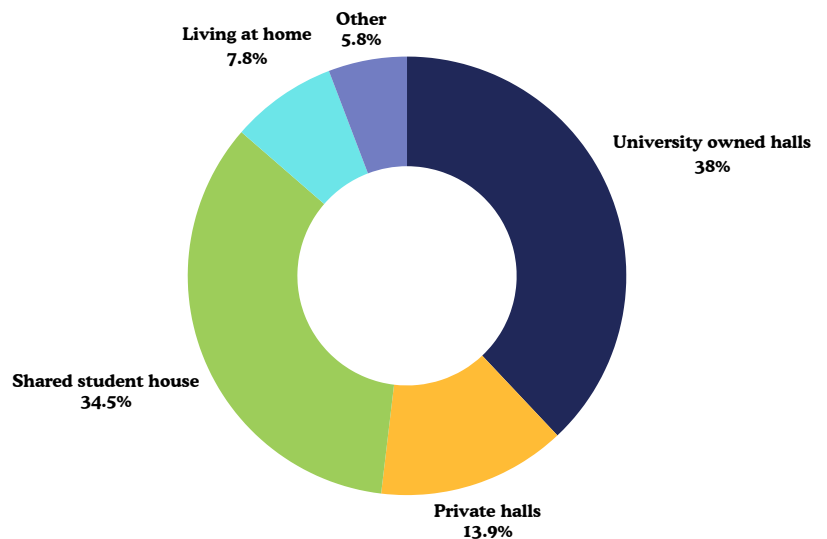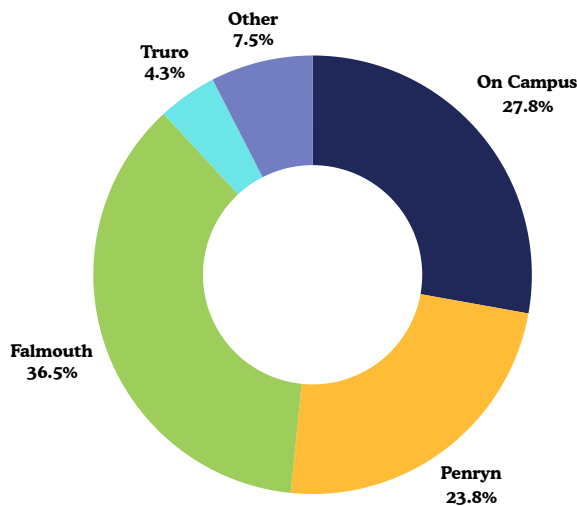
About You

Demographics

We achieved a total response of 345 which included students from both universities, the three campuses and online students. Figure 1 identifies the percentage of respondents from each university as well as the campus that these students were based at. This highlighted that we had an even split between the two universities, which shows we need to improve our engagement with Falmouth students as with current student numbers we would anticipate this figure to be higher than Exeter. It has also shown that for Exeter students that participated almost 95% are based on Penryn campus with 5% studying in Truro and less than 1% of participants account for Exeter in Cornwall online/distance learners. For Falmouth participants, over 55% of students are based on Penryn Campus, 40% at Falmouth campus and less than 2% account for the online/distance learners.

There is a clear need for us to improve our response rate across online students and medical students based in Truro. However, there is also the acknowledgement that this a new area of The SU and therefore, receiving responses from all categories is a good starting point.

Exeter University 51%

Falmouth University 49%

Truro Campus 5.2%

Exeter

Penryn Campus 94.2%

Online 1.2%

Falmouth Campus 40.2%

Falmouth

Penryn Campus 58.5%

Related to the University & campus, participants were also asked a series of questions linked to their living arrangements. This has identified that 28% of students live on campus, 37% live in Falmouth and 24% live in Penryn. The most common living situation was university owned halls, accounting for 38% of participants, closely followed by shared student houses (34%). Almost 15% of participants live in private halls with 8% living at home. Of the 6% of participants who selected other, the most common living arrangements were private rentals and their own residences.

Participants were then asked a series of questions which related to their more specific demographic (mostly centred around protected characteristics such as age, gender, disability and sexuality). This helps us create a more rounded view of our students and the experiences they may face that influence their university experience. 90% of participants were 18-24 with the remaining participants being between the ages of 25 and 64 (with 25-32 accounting for 7% of this). Whilst it is beneficial that we have achieved responses from mature students, we need to increase the figures across age groups to better understand our student community.
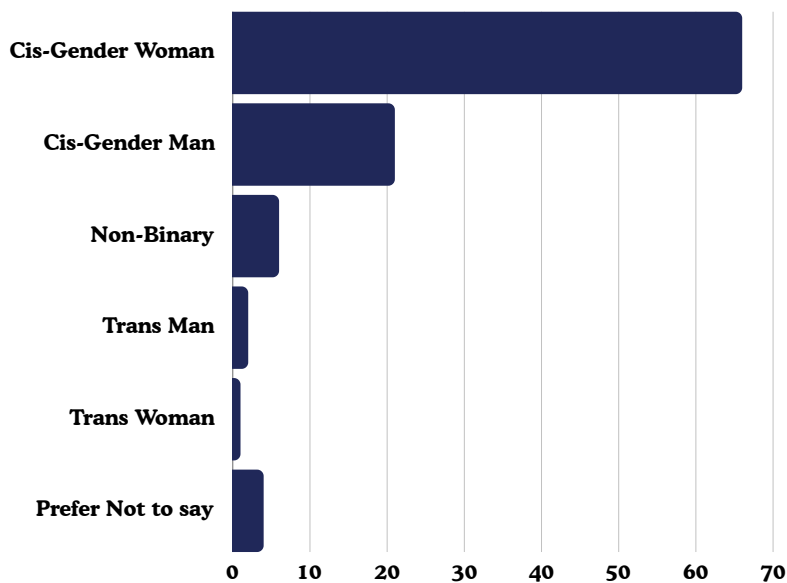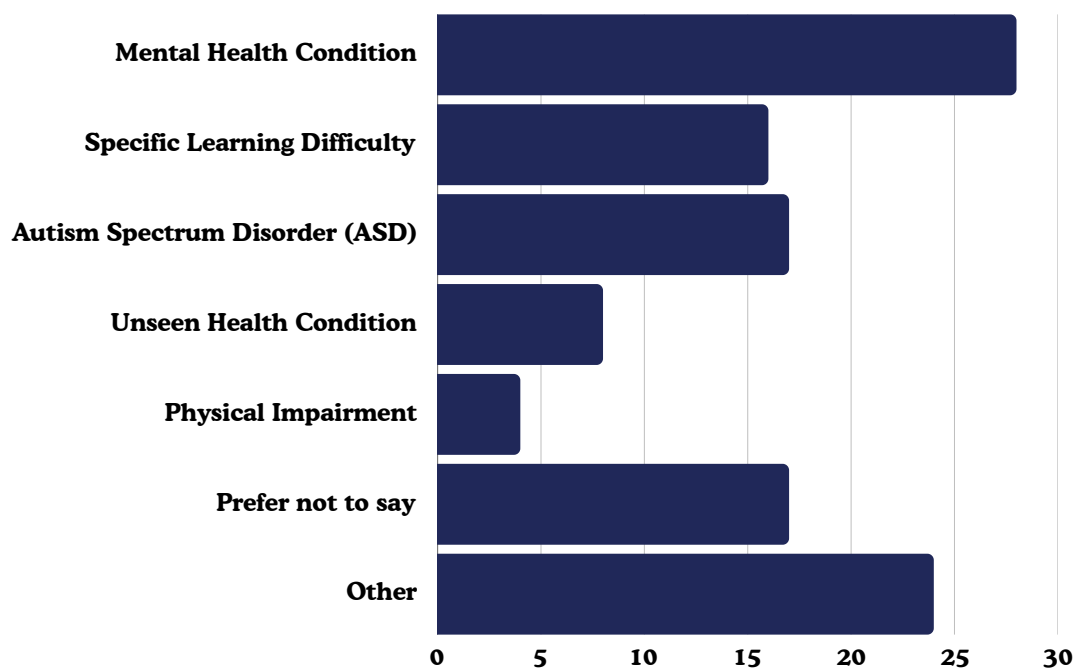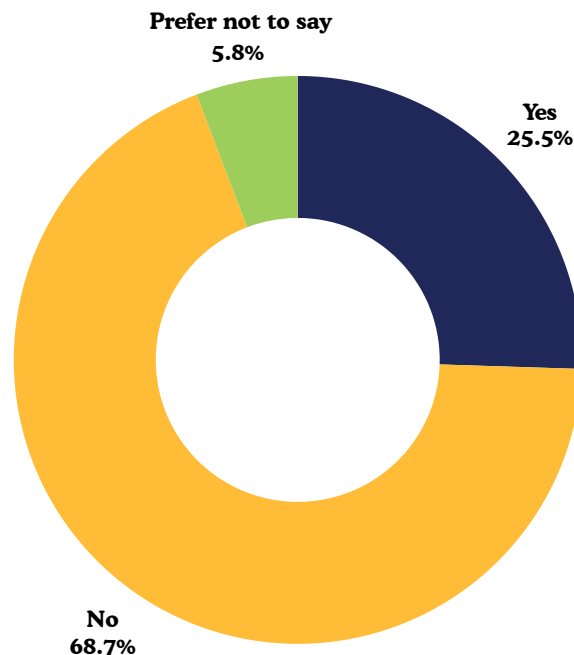
Participants were also asked to select the gender that they most identified with, which showed that we had the highest response rate from cisgendered women who accounted for 66% of all participants. Whilst further work needs to be done to increase response rates across all genders, it is a positive step that we have received engagement with non-binary and trans students as it is key that these voices are considered within our work. It will be necessary for us to assess how we can target our communications better to ensure that we are achieving a more representative response rate across demographics.

Similarly, students were also asked to select the sexuality that they most identify with, 50% of participants identify as straight with 18% identifying as bisexual. Whilst we do not necessarily know how representative this is of our overall university community, it is positive that we have received responses from a range of sexualities.
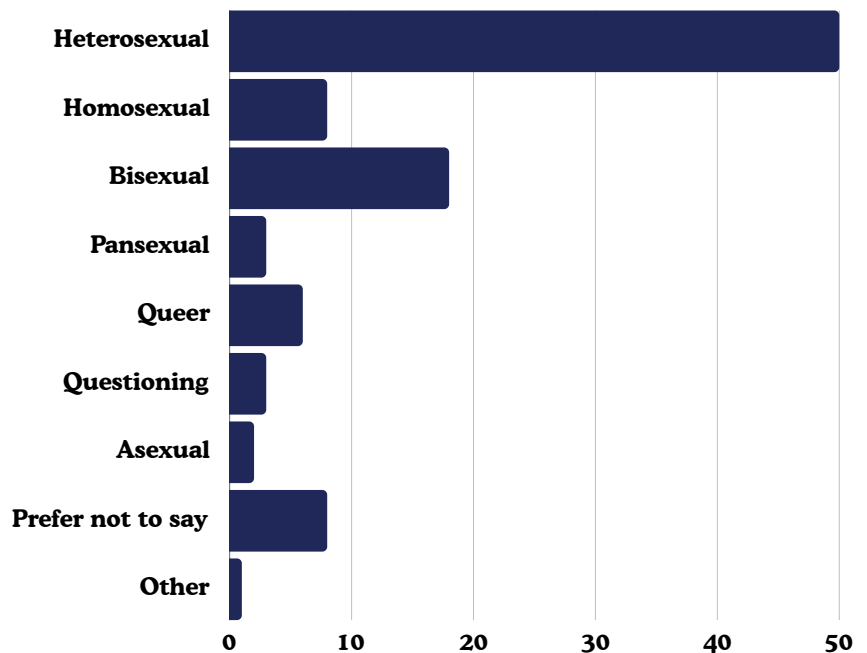
Participants were asked whether they self-identify as having a disability, which highlighted that 26% of participants identified as having a disability. Of this 26% the most common disability amongst participants was mental health conditions (25%) followed by autism spectrum disorder (15%) and specific learning difficulties (14%), of those who answered 'other' they largely specified an exact condition, but reoccurring themes here linked to mental health conditions, ADHD and physical health conditions.

Prefer not to say
5.8%

Yes
25.5%

No
68.7%

Mental Health Condition

Specific Learning Difficulty

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Unseen Health Condition

Physical Impairment

Prefer not to say

Other

0   5   10   15   20   25   30

Motivations & Priorities

Participants were asked a series of questions related to them, including to rank statements based on why they came to university.

	5th Choice	4th Choice	3rd Choice	2nd Choice	1st Choice

To get a degree and support my future career

To build self-confidence and independence

To make new friends

To meet like-minded people

To move away from home

0   20   40   60   80   100   120
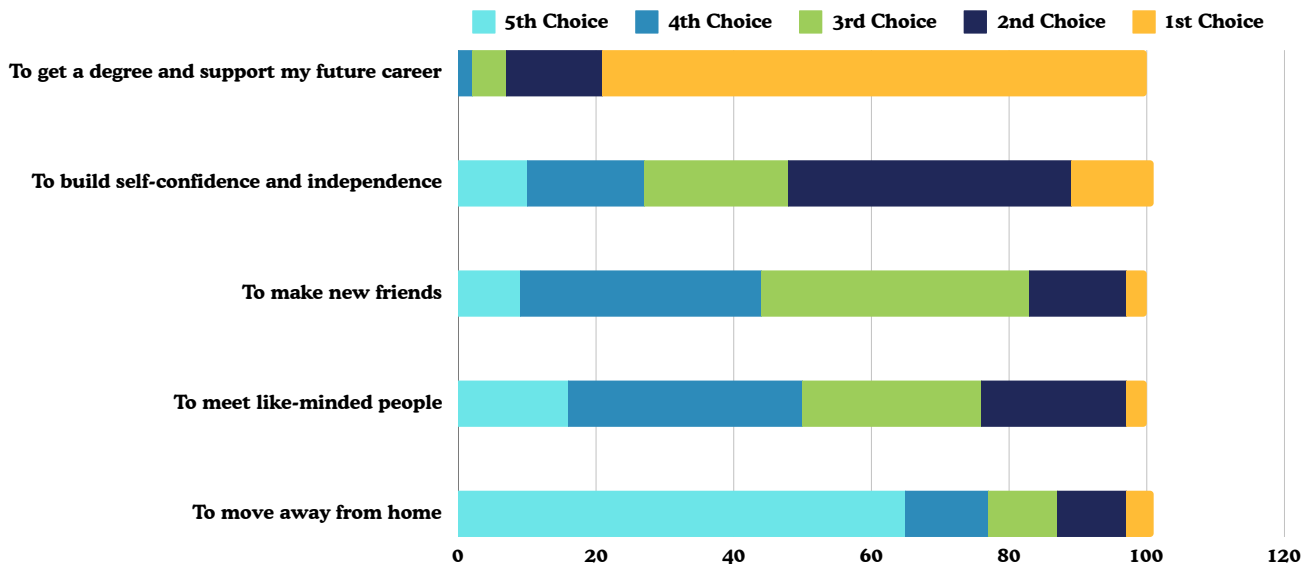
Students identified that the reason that they came to university (as expected) was to g**et a degree and support their future careers** but closely followed by it providing them with an opportunity to **build self-confidence and independence** and to **make new friends**. For Exeter students, whilst getting a degree and supporting their future career was most important but opportunities to make new friends was second most important to them followed by building self-confidence and independence. We see a similar pattern with Falmouth participants, where getting a degree and supporting their future career was their biggest motivation to attend university, followed by wanting to build their self-confidence and independence but for this group **meeting like-minded people** ranked third (a high motivation than making new friends).

This highlights that there is a strong need to embed academic & employability skills within our offering but also to offer opportunities for students to build their confidence, providing them with the skills needed to gain independence. This aspect will then feed into them having the confidence to make new friends.
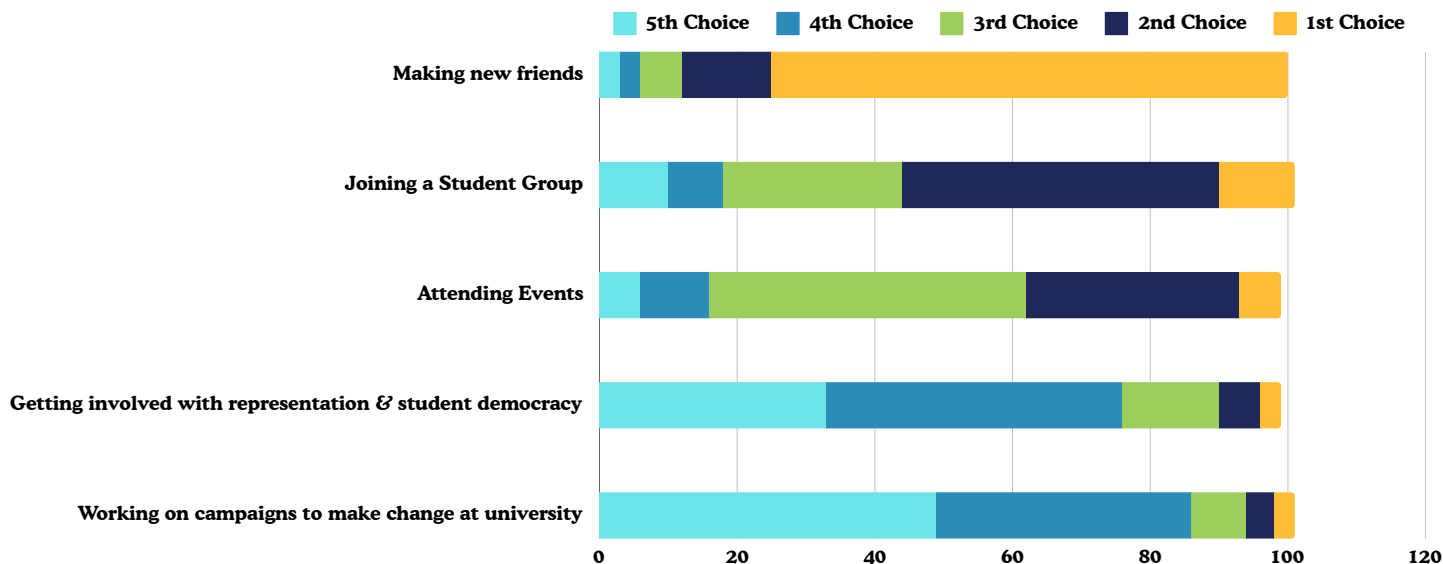
Participants were then asked about what was important to them away from studying and getting a degree. This has highlighted that the aspect most important to students is making new friends which links with joining a student group and attending events. This further emphasises the need to embed opportunities within our remit to increase the scope for students to meet people in a setting that allows for relationships to develop.

We also asked participants to rank a series of topics that link to our Officers' manifestos, with the intention that this will provide us with needed insight into how we prioritise and shape the work they do within this area. This has identified that students' top priorities are **Community, Wellbeing and Employability**. For Exeter students, whilst the top three priorities remained the same, the order of importance differed – which saw Community remain as most important, but this time followed by employability.Whilst Sexual Health and Ethical Partnerships rank lowly amongst students, the key aspect is our approach to this where we should aim to link this work with the aspects that we know are important to students. For example, we now know that employability is a priority to students and as such when looking at work on ethical partnerships, we should aim to approach this from a career future proofing perspective.
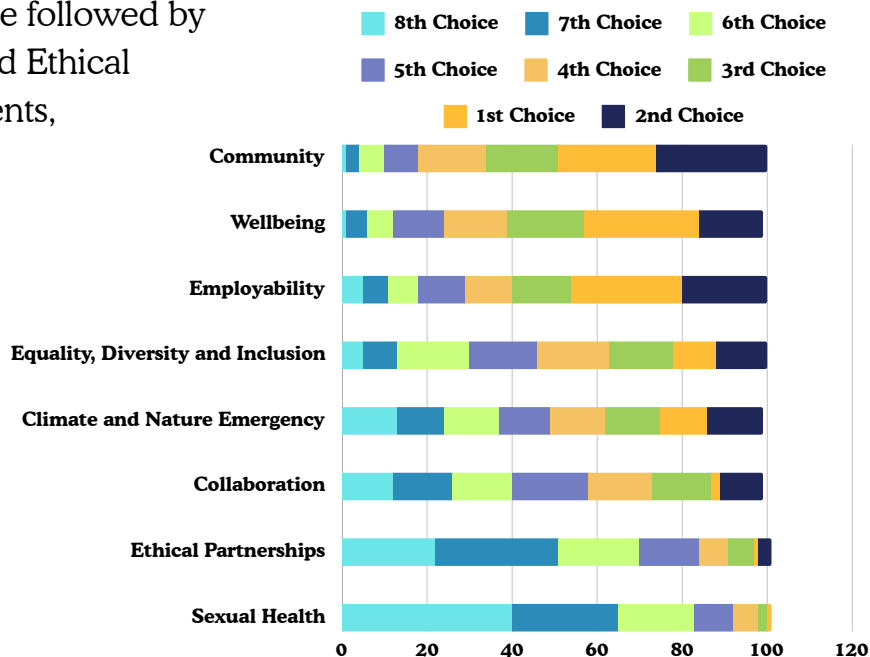
At the end of the 'About You' section, participants were provided with the opportunity to share open text comments related to their motivations to attend University and what is important to their student experience. This data was thematically analysed and identified five key themes related to this topic:

- Career
- Personal Experiences and Development
- Activities
- Location & Atmosphere
- Support & Wellbeing

Of the 74 students who provide further context to their motivations, 16% noted their career & employability to be a key motivation; 24% referred to their personal development or experiences as a key impact to their decision to study and 7% referencing the location or atmosphere of the Universities as important to them.

Perhaps of most note is the personal motivations that drive many of our students across their academic lives and overall university experiences. One student shared that:

"I was never the best student in my class during my school years. However, having the opportunity to choose a career I am passionate about and a university that provides me with everything I need to achieve the best results has motivated me to focus on goals that will help me grow personally and professionally. I also love being surrounded by people who share the same passion and enthusiasm for what they do as I do. We can help each other grow and bring out our best potential."

Whilst a second student shared that their motivation around attending University here was as:

"My late sister went to the same university so being here for myself means a lot."

This highlights that, whilst of course students' careers remain at the forefront of their student experience, their motivations run much deeper. This means that we as providers should work on understanding our students and developing meaningful relationships with them to fully understand how we can support them & develop our offerings to meet these needs.

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As a whole, it is evident that career development is a high priority to students and this goes beyond just obtaining a degree but being able to access networking opportunities, activities that enhance their employability and also improves their self-confidence (which in turn will reflect in their ability to seek work experience, performance in interviews and ultimately support their professional development). Alongside this, we need to understand how we can create a balance between employability and social focused opportunities to meet all their needs.

Events & Activities

The next section of the survey focused on activities and events. The first aspect to explore is related to clubs & societies. Participants were asked a series of questions related to their engagement with student groups and the motivations or barriers associated with this.

This highlighted that 54% of participants are a member of at least one student group (rising to 65% for Exeter students), with an additional 29% planning on joining one. For Falmouth participants, whilst a lower figure of 41% were members of a student group, a further 35% were planning to join one.

No, but I'm not interested in joining one
15.9%

Yes
27.5%
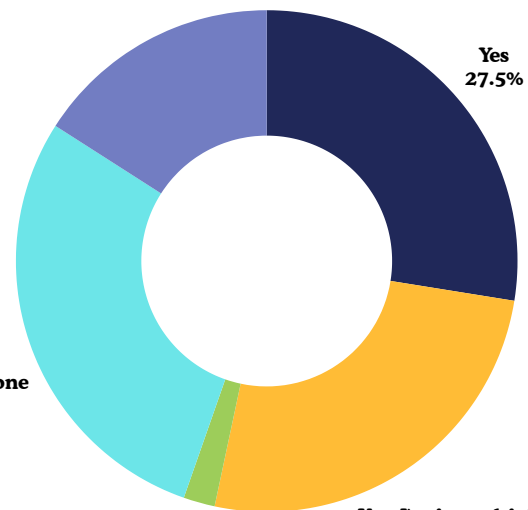
No, but I'm planning to join one
28.7%

Yes but I don't engage with them
2%

Yes, I'm in multiple
25.8%

Other
3.1%

Wanted to go to events
18.7%

Wanted to make new friends
33.3%
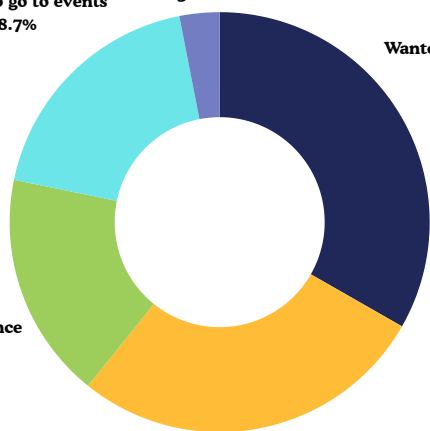
Wanted to build my confidence
17.5%

Wanted to stay active whilst at university
27.5%

Of those who are members, 33% stated that one of the reasons they joined was to make new friends, followed closely by wanting to stay active whilst at university (28%), 19% joined due to wanting to go to events with 17% wanting to build their confidence. As identified through the 'about you' section, making new friends is a clear theme for students and their experience at university.

It was something I was already interested in
38.4%

Other
9.4%

Nothing Interested me
15%

Time
41.7%

The events they offer
16.1%

The people
16.4%

Financial Restrictions
33.9%
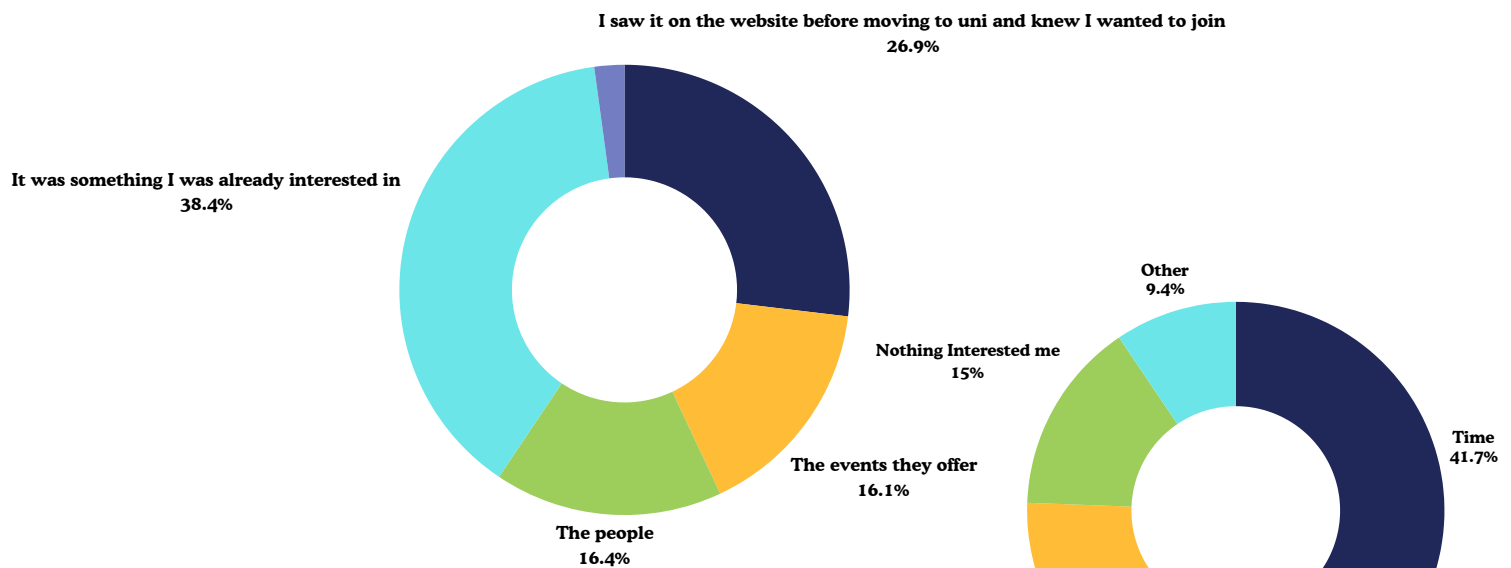
For students who have joined clubs or societies, 38% were attracted to the group as it was something that they were already interested in (rising to 43% for Falmouth), with 27% seeing the group on the website before moving to university and identifying they wanted to join in advance. But for those that aren't interested in joining, 42% noted that this was due to time constraints (rising to 49% for Exeter) but perhaps most importantly 34% selected financial restrictions with one student providing a comment related to this:

"I would've liked to join netball but i simply cannot afford it"

A further 15% who weren't interested noted this as being to do with the offering and that nothing interested them (rising to 21% for Falmouth), with the 9% who selected other highlighting issues such as accessibility, health reasons, online capabilities or that they were balancing other commitments with their degrees. As well as this, one student highlighted that they felt that clubs & societies could be intimidating:

"Intimidating .... people seem to know each other well already??"

Participants were then given the opportunity to provide any additional comments related to student groups, of the 43 that left a response, 18% had overall positive experiences and opinions of joining clubs and societies – with one student noting the importance of societies to them:

"Societies might be one of the most important things to me (aside from the degree) about university…"

With a second student stating that:

"The societies and sports clubs I've joined have been a highlight of my university experience so far!!!"

This emphasises the importance of student groups to the overall university experience. However, 21% of those who provided an open text comment listed financial restrictions as a clear issue for participation with one student highlighting that:

"Some of the fees are quite high and it would be good to be informed about how the money would be used."
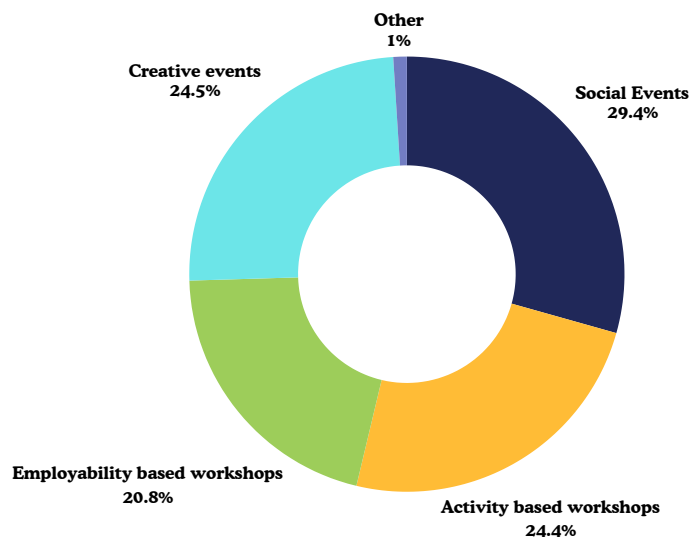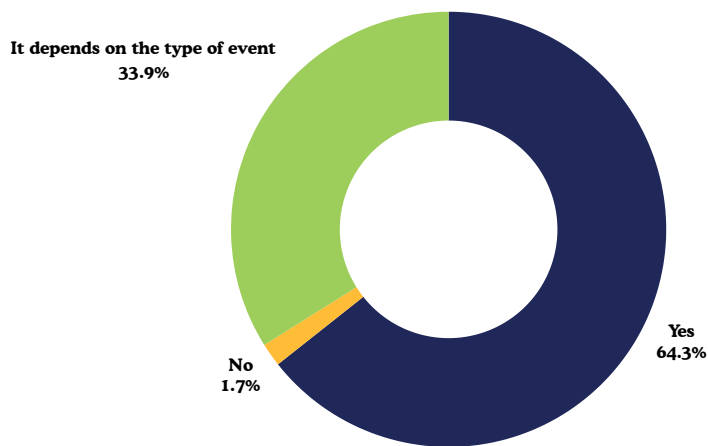
Whilst committees are provided extensive training, there may be a need to ensure that there is increased transparency and communication within student groups to highlight why there are fees/what this is then used for. The SU is already in the process of implementing measures to support student participation amongst students experiencing financial difficulties, but the cost of living continues to result in students being unable to participate in activities. Similarly, time is a key factor that is limiting student participation with a student expressing that:

"I just don't have the time and energy to do things outside of my course, which is a shame as there are multiple societies which are of interest to me."

Whilst another identified that:

"Time is one of the major issues I face when joining societies, I would love to attend more events than I currently do, but it's very difficult around my schedule"

This further highlights the time poor nature of university life for many students which seemingly sees them lose out on key social interaction due to the lack of free time within their schedules to allow for extra-curricular activities.

It depends on the type of event
33.9%

No
1.7%

Yes
64.3%

Other
1%

Creative events
24.5%

Social Events
29.4%

Employability based workshops
20.8%

Activity based workshops
24.4%

Participants were then asked questions related to events, with 64% agreeing that they would be interested in attending events during their time at university (rising to 68% for Exeter students) with a further 34% also expressing interest dependent on the type of event. This trend is the same when Falmouth is looked at in isolation, with a lower figure of 62% of participants agreeing that they'd be interested in attending events but an increased 37% expressing interest depending on the type of events.

Of those who would be interested in attending events, students would most like to attend social events (29%, rising to 33% for Exeter students), Activity based workshops (24%), Creative events (24%) and employability-based workshops (21%, rising to 24% for Exeter students but a lower figure of 18% for Falmouth students). For Falmouth students, they would most like to see Creative events (30%), over social events (25%). Overall, this is in line with earlier findings that highlight the importance of opportunities to make friends but also employability and career readiness.

To further understand how event programmes can be most effective, participants were also asked how regularly they would attend events on campus. This identified that 33% would attend once a week (rising to 35% for Exeter students), 29% a few times a month (31% for Exeter) and 16% more than once a week. When considering that previous responses have shown that students are time poor, there needs to be a balance with the regularity of events with most students expressing they'd attend once a week.

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There are additional challenges for online students who have expressed a desire to attend but due to financial restrictions and family issues are unable to visit the campus, one student expressed that:

"I would attend as many as a budget would allow. Unfortunately, once again, as online students our resources are restricted.... But I would of course LOVE to attend events. I haven't yet managed to get down to campus yet and as a 3rd year student it breaks my heart."

Whilst another online student stated that:

"I can't attend events as I'm not on campus and I can't attend the annual meet-ups as they aren't child friendly, and I have no childcare options."

Another clear issue for students based in Cornwall is the access to events. For instance, one student expressed that:

"Living in Falmouth, sometimes it's a bit of a hassle to get to campus-based events"

Whilst another identified that:

"Lots of events happen on Penryn and getting the bus there to attend an event and nothing else can be a hassle. Bus prices have also risen."

Similarly linked to location, one student provided helpful insight into the separation of academia and events:

"I do wish more social, less academic events were held outside of campus. I would definitely find a more social atmosphere separated from an academic environment would encourage me to participate more."

Thus, there is a clear need to evaluate locations of events and if we are using spaces on campus, how we create a strong atmosphere that moves away from it feeling like an academic location.

Overall, there is a clear desire to attend events and join student groups with many motivations linking to the opportunity it provides to make new friends and socialise, but there are many students struggling to attend due to financial and time constraints.

Representation & Support

The first question participants were asked in relation to representation and support focused on the joint nature of our SU and how accurately this represents them as students. This highlighted that, whilst 68% of participants felt that this does represent them (72% for Exeter students but a lower 62% for Falmouth students), 32% either didn't know or did not feel like it represented them (rising to 39% for Falmouth students).

Not sure 26.4%

No 5.5%

Yes 68.1%
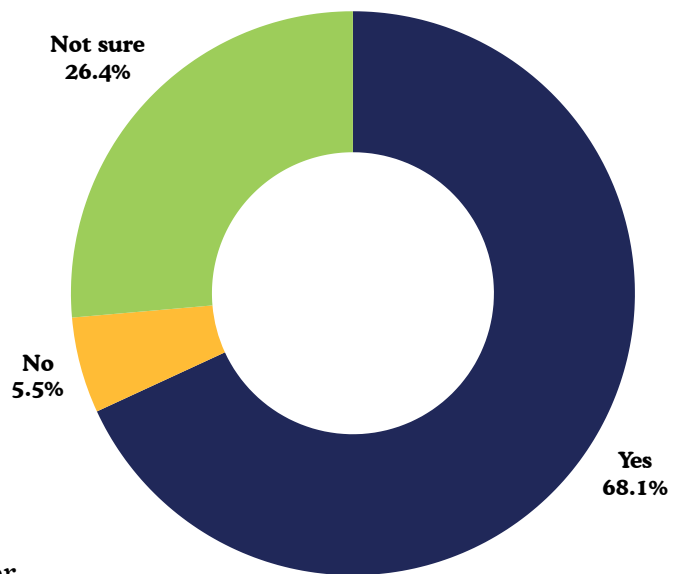
Participants were then asked to provide further information related to their response. 18% of participants were unsure or lacked awareness of what The SU did, with one student sharing that:

"I honestly don't know enough about the SU to pass comment"

There were several comments relating to the clarity of the question being asked so in the future, we need to be considerate of how we word our questions to achieve the best results.

Largely, it can be assumed that, whilst some of this comes from a lack of awareness on who we are as a Union, there is lack of understanding of what students want from representation structures, with one student stating that:

"I feel as though I don't really know how I would want to be represented as a student, but I do feel as though this university's resources are brilliant and would help me with any and all concerns that I may have regarding this issue."

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Participants have told us that they care about employability, their careers and opportunities to socialise so perhaps, students do not prioritise understanding the representation available to them as they view it as a service that they will access when they need it rather than having a rounded understanding of it prior to a need. But further research would be needed to validate this assumption.

Of the participants who felt like it did not represent them, 42% gave reasoning related to them feeling like activities or services weren't targeted towards them – one student stated that:

"I'm online, so this doesn't describe me"

Whilst another shared that:

"... SU events feel more catered towards people who are more creatively-minded rather than scientifically-minded"

A further 11% also questioned the differences between Falmouth and Exeter as institutions, with one student highlighting:

"I feel like Falmouth and Exeter are too different to be represented by one organisation"

With another sharing a similar viewpoint:

"I think that Exeter uni's priorities and values are different to Falmouth and that sometimes they can take control of the narrative due to being a better funded partner in the situation. I think they also can be quite exclusive towards Falmouth students using "their" services sometimes despite us being a shared campus, particularly some of the employability areas."

Overall, there was a generally positive response to their reasoning with many participants noting that The SU being joint helps promote representation and community. One student highlighted that:

"...the SU here is incredibly strong and inspiring to me as I feel they include everyone and want to listen and encourage others to express themselves too"

Whilst another commented that it *"creates a sense of cohesion and community"*.

Overall, whilst participants agree that they feel that a joint SU represents them, there is a level of confusion and lack of awareness on what this means in practice. This suggests that further work is needed to not only communicate with students but to also accurately gauge their opinions on our structures and how this represents them. This is further iterated in the next series of questions which explore representation more specifically.

Participants were asked if they were aware of how they're represented by The SU and 54% of participants were aware of the processes but did not know how they represent them (lowers to 51% for Exeter but rises to 59% for Falmouth). This is in line from the findings from comments students left about representation & support, with one student highlighting:

"I know who the presidents are and what their goals are, but they all seem to be working at a wider university level, which is also good, but they don't seem to be representing"

For those that did know how they were represented, they were able to pick out key process such as support, representation and presidents and academic reps. However, when participants were asked if they were aware of who their Sabbatical Officers are, 73% either didn't know any of them or only knew one or two (rising to 80% for Falmouth students). So, there needs to be further work to increase the presence of Officers and the work that they are doing.

Yes
26.4%

No
41.4%

I know who one or two of them are, but not all of them
32.2%
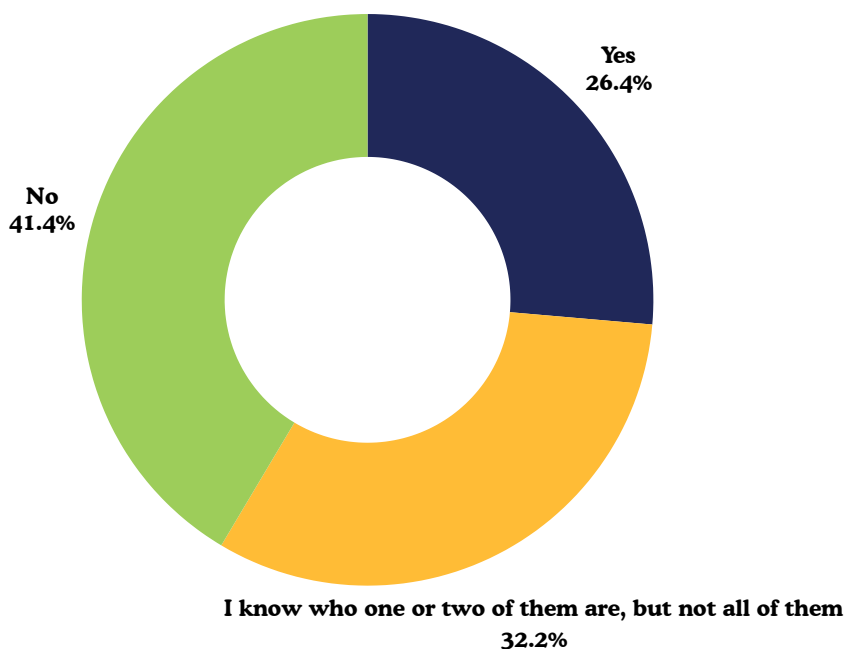
To further understand students' representation needs, participants were asked what representation meant to them. With 344 comments, there were four key themes that emerged: advocacy, student voice, action, and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI). One student summarised this fully with their comment:

*"**Representation means to feel seen, comfortable and safe. To me, it means a support system for you as an individual – not just an academic. It should mean that are plans and thoughts are heard and implemented to make the overall university life a better place for individuals as students and individuals as people in general.**"*

Overall, students want their voices to be heard (whether that is by them advocating for themselves or on behalf of them) but crucially, they want to see their feedback actioned as well as being able to see themselves in those with positions of power across The SU and universities. To support our knowledge around this area, participants were then asked what makes them feel represented at university:

Visible improvements or changes to you university experience
33.3%

Being able to see yourself in the Officers
15%

Being well informed to the work that The SU is doing on your behalf
29.2%

Opportunities to provide feedback on your experiences
22%

This highlighted that participants feel represented when they: can see visible improvements or changes to their university experience (33%); are well informed to the work that The SU is doing on their behalf (29%, 31% or Exeter Students); have opportunities to provide feedback on their experiences (22%); and when they can see themselves in the Officers (15%). Whilst a similar trend to Exeter can be seen when Falmouth students are looked at in isolation, Falmouth participants felt most represented when they were well informed to the work that The SU is doing on their behalf (36%), being able to see themselves in the Officers (24%) and when there are visible improvements or changes to your university experience (23%). The key reoccurring theme throughout this section is the ability to see action happening whether that is physical changes being implemented or the communication of next steps from students raising concerns or providing feedback.

Overall (in terms of representation), participants are aware of processes in place but lack the knowledge of how this represents them and (largely) the benefits to them from this. Students value being seen and that their voice is not only heard but there is visible action from their opinions & feedback when they provide it.

Participants were then asked what support is most important to them at university, which highlighted that **Academic** support is most important, followed by: **Mental Health and Wellbeing; Careers and employability**; and **financial** support. For Exeter students, the order of importance differed and was as follows: **Mental Health & Wellbeing, Academic, Careers & Employability and Financial.** Similarly, when Falmouth was looked at in isolation, **Mental Health & Wellbeing** support was ranked as most important, followed by **academic, financial and then careers and employability.**

Participants were then asked where they would be most comfortable seeking advice or support if they needed it whilst at university with a staggering 64% choosing friends and family (rising to 71% for Exeter students), followed by: lecturers or course leaders (15%) and course mates (10%). For Falmouth students, the pattern differs slightly with 58% feeling most comfortable seeking support from friends and family, 18% from Lecturers and Course Leader, with 8% choosing the Compass Help Desk. Friends and family remain the first point of call for students seeking advice but there are differences between universities of where else they'd access support.

There is a clear barrier for students accessing support with 50% of participants who left a comment surrounding support identifying issues, challenges or improvements related to support services at university. One student highlighted that:

"There is support offered but it seems all over the place and you have to jump through hoops to get to them which is not very help to people who are in need of them..."

Whilst another student shared that:

"I'm struggling with student finance and DSA and never really get the hand holding support I need, I only get signposting. Noone spends time with me walking through each step."

This is in line with another student who shared that they:

"...deal with anxiety so it's difficult to approach student support as reaching out is quite overwhelming."

Students also provided specific information about their experiences with support services, this highlighted that students find it hard to access support but also, there are issues with the provisions themselves – one student shared that:

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"The mental health support service needs more people and more funding, the support they provide is not helpful because they can't dedicate the time to each student."

Overall, students are facing barriers to access support but feel most comfortable seeking advice from those closest to them (friends and family) so there is scope to explore peer to peer support offerings. There needs to be further work to communicate our structures and ensure that students not only know the processes that we have in place but also how this represents them.

Communication

The final section of the survey explored students' interaction with our communication channels.

41% of participants stay up to date with The SU via social media (45% for Exeter students and a lower figure of 36% for Falmouth students) followed by newsletters (27%, 23% for Exeter students and 32% for Falmouth students) and the website (21%, 23% for Exeter students) with 10% saying they don't (rising to 12% for Falmouth students). Participants were also asked how often they interacted with The SU's content. This highlighted that 47% engage with our content on a weekly basis, 17% monthly and 14% daily.

I Don't
9.5%

Website
20.9%

Social Media
41%

Newsletters
27.4%

Officers
1.2%
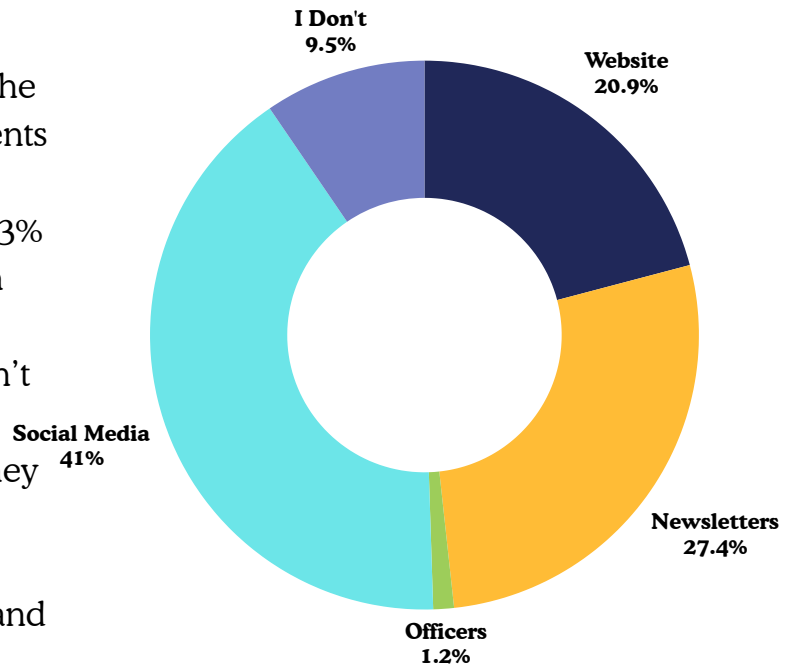
When asked how often they would like to receive a newsletter from the SU, participants would prefer this weekly (34%, rising to 38% for Falmouth students), closely followed by fortnightly (31%) with 22% preferring for this to be monthly. When considering the content they'd like to receive within the newsletter, the most popular choices were event updates (30%, 31% for Exeter Students), information on the local community (21%), updates from student meetings (20%), information about The SU (18%) and a further 10% selecting updates from the Presidents. This is in line with the content participants would like to see on our social media; information on events was highest with 26% followed by: highlights from societies and other student groups (22%, 23% for Exeter Students), information on the local community (17%), updates from student meetings (15%), information about The SU (12%) and updates from presidents (8%).

Participants were also asked what format they would prefer to engage with on social media which highlighted that photos were the most popular (38%) followed by graphics (29%, 26% for Exeter students and rising to 32% for Falmouth students) before a larger gap to video content (17%, 18% for Exeter students) and stories (15%, 18% for Exeter and a lower 12% for Falmouth students).

14 participants chose to leave a comment related to The SU's communications with 43% of these sharing positive remarks regarding the newsletters – one student shared:

"I like how in the emails, you make it easy to spend times on the things that are relevant for you, so it's not too much effort! Otherwise, I probably wouldn't read them but now I do"

This highlights the benefits of segmentation which has been used through this academic year to provide personalised communications to students. There were also several comments related to the variation in ways in which we communicate – one student highlighted the need for:

"...Not just newsletters perhaps more events, stalls in exchange or just more personal, face-to-face exchanges."

Whilst another suggested:

"...interactive quizzes such as 'what society best fits you?' or 'what new sports should I try?' would be really beneficial as I want to advance outside of my comfort zone but a tailored response to interactive questionnaires would be beneficial in narrowing down this decision in a way that best suits the individual without becoming overwhelmed."

Overall, there is a need to engage students in a variety of ways that allow interaction (whether that be physical or virtually).

Recommendations

The following section of this report will look at the key findings of the research providing a set of recommendations (to then action) as a result of the findings.

Employability and opportunities to meet new people are at the core of students' motivations & priorities

When looking at our events and activities (across all teams of The SU) there should be a consideration into how we can embed opportunities for students to gain employability skills but also allowing them to meet new people making valuable professional & personal connections.

98% of participants expressed an interest in attending events at university; with social events proving most popular for Exeter students and creative events for Falmouth

The SU has an extensive event programme that offers students varied opportunities and as this continues to develop there should be consideration in how we communicate these events with the different cohorts & students to improve engagement. This could include targeted communications to the different student types with personalised copy based on their preferences.

42% of participants who weren't interested in joining a student group noted time constraints with a further 34% citing financial restrictions

There are increasing barriers for students looking to engage with The SU (across all aspects and not just limited to student groups) and thus, there should be continued exploration & evaluation into how we can reduce these, supporting students to increase participation.

Students lack awareness of how they're represented, a trend across both universities but was more common amongst Falmouth participants.

There is a need to explore how we can increase awareness, closing the feedback loop so students know their represented by our process & Officers. This is largely achieved by visible

improvements or changes to students' university experiences.

Students are facing barriers to accessing the support they need at university

Students have expressed concerns with accessing support and the level of support they are able to receive through the services offered to them. There needs to be further exploration into support to identify what provisions are available across the partnership, how this can be better communicated to students and if improvements can be made.

41% of participants stay up to date with The SU via social media, with positive viewpoints around the personalised approach to newsletters

Whilst participants expressed they largely stay up to date with The SU via social media, there were many positive comments surrounding the personalised & segmented approach to newsletters. Thus, this should be continued and further developed to maximise engagement.

Overall, students have strong motivations surrounding their time at university with employability, community and wellbeing being reoccurring themes throughout this research. Whilst students appear to be increasingly time poor and facing the impacts of the cost of living crisis, there are significant benefits of being involved in student groups & engaging with wider events/opportunities. Thus, we need to assess how we can collaborate across the partnership to reduce the barriers students are facing to allow them to fully engage.

From the outset of this research, there were three clear objectives which were successfully met:

To understand what matters most to our current students during their time at university.

The Getting Started Survey has highlighted that employability, opportunities to socialise & meet new people, community and wellbeing remain clear motivations and priorities for students.

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To understand what frequency of communications & events is most appropriate for our students.

The research has highlighted that participants would most like to attend events **once a week** with the same frequency preferred for newsletters. The balance here is understanding the programme of events and communication schedules of the wider partnership to avoid saturation/repetition.

To produce a set of recommendations, activities and best practice examples of how to engage students for our future work.

Above there are clear insights and recommendations which will be taken forward to the wider SU team to create clear actions and to be considered in our work going forward.

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